



Guinea Pig Care

Introduction

Small, gentle and lively, well-handled guinea pigs (*Cavia porcellus*) make endearing and personable pets. Being a social animal, they should be kept in groups of at least two, unless owners can spend a reasonable amount of time with them each day. Guinea pigs are most active at dawn and dusk, and the average lifespan is between 5 and 7 years.

General Care

Being a 'prey' species, it is important that guinea pigs be kept in an environment that is physically protected from predators. Additionally, guinea pigs need to feel secure in their enclosure, or they may not behave, eat or react normally. Soiled bedding should be removed daily, and the enclosure should be thoroughly cleaned once or twice a week. Hiding places in the form of boxes or PVC pipes should be provided. Wire flooring can predispose to foot problems, so should be avoided if possible. Appropriate substrates include newspaper, towels, grass and artificial turf. Some guinea pigs will chew on fibres, and cannot have material flooring.

Guinea pigs should be allowed access to direct sunlight regularly, but always with the provision of adequate shelter, so that the guinea pig can retire if overheating or stressed.

Guinea pigs handled frequently when young become well socialised adults. When picking up a guinea pig, it is important to support the entire body. This particularly applies to children, as a guinea pig that does not feel securely held will struggle.

Feeding

Like all animals, guinea pigs need access to fresh water. Depending on the owner's (and guinea pig's) preference, this can be provided as a water sipper, or in a bowl. Take care with new guinea pigs, as they may not recognise water placed in a different type of container, and can dehydrate.

Guinea pigs are best fed similar foods to those that they would eat in the wild, namely hay, grass and small amounts of fruit and vegetables. Fresh hay (ideally "Timothy" hay) should be available all year round and not just as bedding. Grass can be given as well during the summer, although only if not treated with herbicides or insecticides. High fibre is the key to a healthy guinea pig gastrointestinal system. People often do not give vegetables to guinea pigs, in the mistaken belief that they cause diarrhoea. Vegetables do NOT cause diarrhoea as long as the diet is high in fibre and any changes are made very gradually. Apart from Iceberg and Cos lettuces, which are mainly water, virtually all common leafy vegetables, salad items and herbs can be fed to Guinea pigs and also fruits such as apples and pears in small amounts. Wild foods such as dandelion, chickweed and groundsel should be rinsed well before feeding. As long as the Guinea pig is eating the other foods, fresh Guinea pig mix should be restricted to 1 tablespoon full a day.

Guinea pigs, similar to humans, do not produce vitamin C, so need to have it supplied in the diet each day. The average, non-breeding, healthy guinea pig will need 25mg/kg of vitamin C each day. Breeding or unwell animals should be given 50mg/kg. The vitamin C is ideally provided in the diet.

Sources of vitamin C (with mg per cup) include:

Turnip greens	260	Strawberries	100
Mustard greens	252	Melon	90
Dandelion	200	Broccoli florets	87
Kale	192	Spinach	60
Brussel sprouts	173	Raspberries	60
Parsley	140	Orange	52
Broccoli leaf	120	Cabbage leaves	50

Guinea pig "mix" has good levels of vitamin C when very fresh, but NO vitamin C four months after manufacture. It has little fibre.

Breeding Guinea Pigs

The duration of pregnancy in guinea pigs is 59 to 72 days.

The pubic symphysis (join in the pelvis) separates approximately two days before giving birth. If sows have not bred before 6 months of age, the symphysis is likely to have fused and a caesarian section will be required. Baby guinea pigs are born fully furred, with open eyes and able to walk soon after birth. They normally wean at three weeks of age, but can survive if weaned as early as 5 days.

Mites in Guinea Pigs

Mites are a common cause of skin problems in guinea pigs. These cause irritation, itchiness and fur loss, and can be diagnosed with skin scrapings. These parasites can be found on most guinea pigs, all the time (they are infected from their mother soon after birth), but become a clinical problem when the pig is stressed. Treatment aims to reduce the numbers of mites present. Some guinea pigs seem predisposed to repeated problems with mites. To help reduce the clinical signs, vitamin C can be added to the diet during outbreaks, at a dose of 100mg/kg for up to one week.

